DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 471 CS 505 240

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TITLE Communicating Intrapersonally about Stress: The Dynamics on Self.
PUB DATE 15 Feb 86
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Tucson, AZ, February 15-18, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Problems; Coping; Course Content; Higher Education; *Speech Communication; *Speech Curriculum; *Stress Management; *Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

When designing a workshop about communication and stress, it is important to consider the medical definition--that stress is a physiological reaction to an external force that is interpreted by the individual--and the psychological definition--which suggests that through communication with self one can change the stress in one's life. Stress can then be studied as an intrapersonal communication involving human information processing, perception, cognition, feeling, and listening and speaking. Emotions are meanings that have come from one's way of linguistically constructing the world and can therefore be changed using rational self-counseling (changing irrational thoughts to more rational beliefs) and cognitive restructuring (using guidelines to rational thinking). Encouraging students to reconstruct their own realities and to gain control over stress in their lives is a practical approach for a basic course in communication. (Material elaborating on the 11 examples of irrational thinking, the 5 guidelines to rational thinking, and the irrational use of "should" is appended.) (EL)

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COMMUNICATING INTRAPERSONALLY ABOUT STRESS: THE DYNAMICS ON SELF

A Paper Presented at the Basic Course Conference
Western Speech Communication Association Convention
Tucson, Arizona February 15, 1986

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INTRODUCTION

When establishing a workshop or basic course about communication and stress, it is important to have the theoretical background that comes from the medical definitions of stress--that stress is a physiological reaction to an external force that is given some interpretation by the individual--(Buell & Eliot, 1979, pp. 365-368). and the psychological definitions that suggest through communication with self one can change the stress in one's life (Selye, 1976). These two general definitions lay the ground work which develop the context for teaching about the communication aspect of stress. If one ascribes to the medical and psychological schools that suggest that stress is a learned pattern of behavior, learned through the art of communication, then the communication aspect becomes a learning about intrapersonal communication and how we as humans process, retrieve, order and talk about information.

THE WORKSHOP

The workshop established at Humboldt State University was a 2 unit/credit course where we experimented with the notion of teaching about stress from the communication viewpoint. In general, we were very successful, with 50+ students attending a weekend long seminar and a number of evening discussions before and after the weekend. With 50+ students enrolled, we needed to spend some time introducing basic communication theory. The basic theory of communication as a process, complete with communication model was presented so that all the students could begin learning from a basic knowledge level. While introducing

communication as a process, the notion of change and growth can be introduced--these are important concepts that reappear throughout the workshop. For many people, the notion of one's own ability to change thoughts one has is a very new and somewhat unusual idea. The creation of reality through the use of language is another important conceptualization for students; since through this process of creation one can choose lots of stressors in one's life or choose a limited number of stress situations.

CREATING REALITY

The creation of reality through one's language is a basic stepping stone in the workshop (Goodall, 1983). Through the use of language, the notion of creating reality as a variable is dependent on where one is standing at any given time. Each person sees and intreprets things somewhat differently. As humans, we are always perceiving information, processing information and changing our intrepretations of things through communication with ourselves. In effect, we are creating and recreating reality. Our ability to think, comprehend and language our thoughts is called human information processing--it is the self-talk or intrapersonal communication process that we engage in. Human information processing is composed of four components: the cognitive component, feeling component, human information processing, and operational component (Goss, 1982, p. 4).

HUMAN INFORMATION PROCESSING

The actual process of human information processing is comprised of the gathered information that is stored and retrieved in short-term or long-

term memory (Goss, 1982, p. 33). Our short-term memory is designed to hold information in a suspended state, our long-term memory stores (for our discussion) the emotional products or stories--the product that allows us to react to a situation without much analysis.

Kenneth Boulding provides a wonderful example of what information processing is. He suggests that you order your knowledge and create an image for yourself of how the world is and will be. New experiences and new information have one of four effects on your image. You add information to your image of the world, or you reinforce a present image that is held, or you produce a slight alteration in an already held image, and finally you might be forced to thoroughly restructure an image (Boulding, 1956).

It is important to recognize that once we have this " created image" in our minds, the image produces a filter that is then applied over onto the world. Our images then are part of reality as we have created it through language. Whenever we encounter information or images that are new an immediate decision is made about its meaning--an organization process occurs that we call a person's perception. Perception, then, is a process and a product. A person can call on information that is stored (a product) and the product will give you a place to begin the process of adding or redefining an image that is being apprehended. In this view, our emotions are process and product, also.

For example, someone may be afraid or fearful of spiders. Upon seeing a spider an immediate sense of "fear emotion" is apparent; this is an emotional product. Through learning, experiences, and perceptions that have been developed about spiders a fear "product" is completed that allows someone to automatically react to spiders with fear. However, suppose that

your small daughter has received a rubber spider that she left in your study? Is it appropriate to react to that spider with the emotion of fear? Often, we will skip the process part--we will not recreate a perception--and the product established earlier becomes a way of apprehending spiders. This established product is (spider=fear) easy to use; we do not go through the process of perceiving the spider for what it is *in this instance*--rubber. Stress in our lives often comes from learned emotional products, in part a process that we use, to comprehend the complexities and demands of everyday living. Involved in our use of emotions as ways of apprehending our world is the domain of perception and how it works.

PERCEPTIONS

Where do our perceptions come from? In a very general sense, our perceptions are composed of information that has been gathered, stored, and retrieved by us. Through our ability to communicate with ourselves and others we engage in a process of constructing meanings of things, the cultural knowledge we have come to understand and believe, and the roles that we find ourselves playing out.

What types of information can be used to create perceptions? For most people information is anything that the individual attends to, for the purpose of reducing uncertainty or confirming or altering prior knowledge. Whatever may be a salient part of our world at that moment in time is considered when we gather information. To further understand the nature of what information is, we can compare it to noise. Noise can be any signal that a person does not classify as information. For example, some people can study and read with music on, the television blaring, they have taught

themselves to regard that as noise that is blockable. For others, reading is something that can only be done when the surroundings are quiet.

Often sensation is confused with perception. It must be understood that information gathering that leads to perception is different from sensation. When you sense something you are hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, and smelling. When you are perceiving, you are interpreting what you have sensed. Sensations are the signals that have not been intrepreted by you. Perceptions are composed of sensations plus meanings plus feelings you give the meanings. When you have stored this information and then retrieve it from your memory you begin the process of perceiving and interpreting the world that you have created.

COGNITIVE COMPONENT

The meanings that one attaches to a perception and chooses to language come from the individuals' internal understandings of the world. The spider example above indicates a meaning that has been constructed in language and works as a perception (or way of apprehending) that a particular individual holds regarding spiders. This cognitive component of human information processing is comprised of an individual's reality that, in turn, is composed of individual experiences and knowing, the cultural roles and realities that influence the individual, and the languaging capacity that the individual has available to her/him. On a very basic level, this languaging is denotative or functional and formal: For example, we silently (or overtly) ask, "What is this?" " What are its attributes?" "What does it do?"

Our language operates on a connotative level also: In this domain we ask, "How do I feel about this?" "How will I affectively respond to this situation?" or "I feel . . ." How we feel about a situation or thing is closely attached to the attitudes we hold regarding it as well as a host of factors that comprise our sense of who we are. For our purposes, connotative meaning is to be taken as affective meaning--how we feel about the thing or person we are apprehending.

FEELING COMPONENT

The feeling component is characterized by the attitudes that we have and seek to maintain. Thus, while we have attitudes about most all things we know, the intensity and valence (or direction as positive or negative) of an attitude will differ from one object domain to another. Returning to the example about spiders, we ask: "What is this?" We respond, "a spider." We, then may ask, "What does it do?" From prior constructions we know that spiders bite people. At this point our emotions about spiders enters and we ask something like, "How do I feel about it?" We call it "being frightened or scared" which is indicative of the way an emotion is expressed, in symbolic form. The spider "produces" our physical alarm reaction which, in turn, is encoded as fright. Should fright be sustained, the outcome may be detrimental to our health and well-being, because it prompts what we refer to as a physical stress reaction.

OPERATIONAL COMPONENT

This component is comprised of our actual listening and speaking skill (Goss, 1982, p. 89).How we encode and decode our thoughts and perceptions and utilize our listening skills to comprehend others and our world. The listening dimension of emotions is the encoding and decoding that occurs over an external or internal image that we apprehend in our world; and how we subsequently will choose to language that message to ourselves and others.

Often our encoding and decoding will become a short-cut for how we will react to a situation, we will jump to a reaction that we need not have as in the spider example above.

THE ABC'S OF A COMPLETE EMOTION

Perception, or awareness of a situation, via sensory information that is fed to the brain may be either external to you, such as seeing an accident or smelling a flower; or internal to you, such as an awareness of personal anxiety or tension in remembering a past event. Whatever the combination of factors, there is an activating event, the "A" or first thing that occurs (Maultsby, 1975, pp. 27-42).

The B step is the evaluating dimension of emotion. This is the intrapersonal communication domain--your self-talk-- an evaluation of an event usually occurs in relatively positive, relatively negative, relatively neutral language, or some combination of the three. A person who has anxiety about writing, may sit down to write and tell themself that they are anxious because they do not write well which may increase their ability "to not" write well and lead to an "inability" to write at all--the proverbial

"writers block." By engaging in relatively negative self-talk about writing, the act of writing could become a highly anxious act to engage in. There is evidence to suggest, that negative self-talk for human beings is much more frequent than any positive self-talk (Bowers, Metts, & Duncanson, 1985, pp.500-550).

The C step is feeling. At this step, we attribute to physical sensations meanings, such as, happy, angry, sad, depressed, calm, content, etc. Step C is the direct result of evaluating seen in step B; and, therefore, will be relatively positive, relatively negative, relatively neutral, or a combination, depending on the types of thoughts that I have had in Step B.

Feelings are the impetus that guide us into some action. For example, because we tell ourselves that we do not write well and feel anxious about the task, we feel anxiety and depression. Our behavior tends to follow the ancient human emotional response patterns of readiness to "fight or flee." In this case, the person under no circumstances, may ever put self in a position of writing--which is "fleeing" from writing. Therefore, our emotional behavior becomes like other behavior, if you practice long enough it becomes a habit.

There is an automatic quality to habit that translates nicely in ways emotional response patterns tend to develop. When our emotions become habit, we utilize the product of our perceptions without evaluations taking place. In a sense, we have an "automatic" reaction. The ways we have become accustomed to responding to writing (or spiders) tend to resist change which results in the patterns of emotional response we have to certain conditions/circumstances in our world. What we fail to recognize is that we have other options for behaving; those options, however, are not

available to us because of the habitual way we have come to know spiders and writing.

These abbreviated emotions may become counterproductive. Our habitual reactions may prompt stress to appear at physiological levels. The cognitive component of meaning and language combined with attitudes and self-concept and our feelings are directly related to gathering, storing and retrieving information. In the formative stages of habit, we gather, store, and retrieve emotions that can be physically counterproductive and lead to a stress reaction. Therefore, our emotions are part of our perceptions and we learn how to emotionally respond as part of our perceptions and our interpretations of the world.

THE COMMUNICATION OF EMOTION

Emotions are perceptions and feelings that have been gathered, stored, and retrieved like other forms of information. They are interpreted ways of seeing and being in the world. They are meanings that have come from our own way of linquistically constructing the world and therefore can be changed if they are brought to awareness and are removed from the taken for granted domain (Averill, 1980, p. 305).

In Western culture we often take a passive view of emotions; we tend to believe that emotions, if "left unattended" will sneak up on us, and they are there no matter what or how we choose to language them. However, because they are constructions that have been reached through language, they can be changed and relearned. Solomon provides an example:

> We "fall in" love, much as one might fall into a tiger trap or a

> swamp. We find ourselves "paralyzed" with fear, as if we had been innoculated with a powerful drug. We are "plagued" with remorse, as if by flies or mosquitoes. We are "struck" by jealousy, as if by a Buick; "felled" by shame, as a tree by an ax; "distracted" by grief, as if by a trombone in the kitchen; "haunted" by guilt, as if by a ghost; and "driven" by anger, as if pushed by a prod. Our richest poetic metaphors, grown trite with overuse, are images of passivity. We are "heartbroken, " "crushed," "smitten," "overwhelmed," "carried away," and "undone" by passion. The passions (or emotions) are said to emanate from the heart--spiritual animal say pumped through our veins. Our hearts, beyond the reach of our wills, are contrasted with our "heads." While the latter struggles to maintain calm, the former suffers the fate of any "butcher's" victim--our hearts are cleft in two, as bruised and bloody flesh, hot or now grown cold, pounding, beating, bursting, gushing love, and hard as stone or soft with aching, stabbed and smitten, torn and tender (1976, pp. 120-132)

The way we understand our emotions then, can be reconceptualized as <u>active</u> and not be relegated to a passive response that claims we are merely agents buffeted about by emotions that creep up on us. This is the central focus for the workshop; namely, that "emotional tapes" from a passive intrapersonal voice if left to run our lives can cause great stress that may eventually kill us through heart disease, hypertension or cancer. To change the stress that we feel in our everyday lives, we need to comprehend how intrapersonal communication works in the construction of our perceptions and subsequent intrapersonal tapes. In addition, we need to know how we language our emotions and how they become products--set in concrete where we tend to habitually say, "I always react with anger when caught in traffic jams!" We need to know that stress is physiological at its core and wherher we are having a headache or heartattack that our bodies are reacting in a primeval way--to fight or flee. To change the meanings we have about the everyday irritants in our lives we need to reconstruct the way we have designed stories about how we "feel" in situations that we

have little or no control over. In the workshop we offered, we suggested using rational self-counseling and cognitive restructuring. Both of these methodologies come from the psychological world view, and rely heavily on intrapersonal communication or self-talk. In developing this section of the workshop, we worked closely with a rational behavior therapist, who ultimately presented some of the material.

RATIONAL SELF-COUNSELING

Rational self-counseling relies heavily on the theoretical notions developed by Albert Ellis as rational emotive therapy(Ellis, 1974, pp.308-344). The basic constructs that are addressed fall into the categories of irrational and rational thinking. Maultsby(1975, pp. 7-14). suggests that the reconstruction of reality through intrapersonal communication comes out of the understanding that some beliefs that we hold about the world are not rational, but are well constructed social beliefs that are taught to individuals. Changing some of these irrational thoughts to more rational beliefs is the basic place to change our emotional reactions . A list of the irrational thoughts that operate in our culture are:

1. It is essential that one can be loved and approved by virtually everyone in his/her community.
2. One must by perfectly competent, adequate, and achieving to consider oneself worthwhile.
3. Some people are bad, wicked, or villainous and therefore should be blamed and punished.
4. It is a terrible, catastrophe when things are not as one wants them to be.
5. Unhappiness is caused by outside circumstances, and the individual has no control over it.
6. Dangerous or fearsome things are causes for great concern, and their possibility must be continually dwelt upon.

7. It is easier to avoid certain difficulties and self-responsibilites than to face them.
8. One should be dependent on others and must have someone stronger on whom to rely.
9. Past experiences and events are the determiners of present behavior; the influence of the past cannot be eradicated.
10. One should be quite upset over other people's problems and disturbances.
11. There is always a right or perfect solution to every problem, and it must be found or the results will be catastrophic(Patterson, 1973, pp. 52-54).

Each of these irrational thoughts are derived from our language, meaning and perception and have helped to develop a product that may be an inappropriate emotional reaction to a situation that will ultimately cause stress. Once an individual understands the notion of irrational thoughts as social constructions of reality that inform our own emotional storytelling--to greater or lesser degrees--we can move on to the rational guidelines that Maultsby suggests can help reframe or reconstruct our cognitive thought process.

Five Guidelines to Rational Thinking

1. Is this thought based on objective reality?
2. Does this thought help me to protect my life?
3. Does this thought help me to reach my short and long-term goals?
4. Does this thought prevent significant conflict with others?
5. Does this thought help me to feel the way I want to feel? (Maultsby, 1975, p.8).

Appendix B further discusses each of these constructs (McIlvain, 1982). These guidelines were used to teach our students how to reconstruct their emotional cognitions to live fuller and less stressful lives. The concept of intrapersonal communication entails "how" all the reconstruction and self-examination takes place, and although the psychological literature uses the

term "self-talk," the presence and process of intrapersonal constructions of communication are clearly evident throughout. One further construct from the psychological domain is the use of the word *should*. From a rational emotive theraputic viewpoint, the word *should* causes the majority of anger, irritation, frustration, and guilt that we as humans feel. For example, when someone who is picking us up is late, often we feel that it *shouldn't* be this way--the person *should* be on time. And generally the subsequent feeling is anger at that person. We are demanding that reality be different than it is; that the person not have been late when they obviously were late. We feel a person *should* not have done something that they obviously did. In reality, our demanding that it be different is irrational because it has already happened and cannot be changed. Therefore, an irrational use of the word *should* is not only a denial, in this example of reality, it is also a disguised personal wish, want or desire. One may wish that someone was not late, and in fact indicate that fact to them by requesting that they be on time or call if they are running late. However, often we use up energy being angry that they are late. As McIlvain points out:

> When resolving the problem of the irrational use of "should," I generally recommend that people rid their thoughts and speaking of the word entirely, and consciously substitute phrases such as "I would prefer," " I would like," "I wish," etc., honestly stating personal preferences, desires, opinions, rather than disguising them as rule-bound demands. Additionally, I ask them to recognize that given the law of cause and effect, <u>everything is always as it should be</u>, whether we like it that way or not (McIlvain, Appendix C).

Thus, the focus of this workshop revolved around the restructuring of one's reality through the practical application and teaching of what irrational and rational thoughts are and the specific use of the word *should*. This is a

practical way to encourage students to learn to reconstruct their own realities and have some control over the types of stress they allow in their lives. Also, evident is the power of words and the importance of how we listen to others and to ourselves.

How we chose to speak in our world to ourselves as well as others is of paramount importance. How we language our world at an intrapersonal level informs how we act and interact at an interpersonal level. We believe that using this material in basic courses is quite easy, though a workshop format tends to be perceived as a more intense exploration of various dimensions of self-talk.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE BASIC COURSE

The notion of emotion as a perceptual bag of personal stories that each of us carries around would fit very well in most interpersonal courses where perception is studied and defined. Additionally, we believe that any basic course--be it public speaking or nonverbal or interpersonal--can deal with the notion of stress. In fact, there are very direct links between seeing emotions and stress in this way, as stories filled with irrational thoughts, and what most teachers experience in their courses as communication apprehension. Helping students to sort out their feelings and arrange them in more constructive frameworks has been a solution posited in many articles on how to deal with communication apprehension. In most basic courses in communication, we suggest that the concept of stress is an appropriate unit to include.

It is certainly more then a buzz word in our vocabulary of the 1980s--we know through recent medical research that stress reactions do kill

people--through hypertension, cardiovascular disorders and traumas and through the development of some forms of cancer. With that in mind, talking about stress as a communication construct that is changeable through languaging is to recognize the power we really have to control our lives. We can think of no more compelling reason to suggest the importance of these ideas.

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IRRATIONAL THINKING

1. It is essential that one be loved or approved by virtually everyone in his community. This is irrational because it is an unattainable goal, and if one strives for it, one becomes less self-directing and more insecure and self-defeating. It is desirable that one be loved; however, the rational person does not sacrifice his own interests and desires to this goal, but expresses them, including the striving to be a loving, creative, productive individual.

2. One must be perfectly competent, adequate, and achieving to consider oneself worthwhile. This again is an impossibility, and to strive compulsively for it results in psychosomatic illness, a sense of inferiority, an inability to live one's own life, and a constant sense of fear of failure. The rational individual strives to do well for his own sake rather than to best others, to enjoy the activity rather than to engage in it solely for the results, and to learn rather than to be perfect.

3. Some people are bad, wicked, or villainous and therefore should be blamed and punished. This idea is irrational because there is no absolute standard or right or wrong and very little free will. "Wrong" or "immoral" acts are the results of stupidity, ignorance, or emotional disturbance. All men are fallible and make mistakes. Blame and punishment do not usually lead to improved behavior, since they do not result in less stupidity, more intelligence, or a better emotional state. In fact, they often lead to worse behavior and greater emotional disturbance. The rational individual does not blame others or himself. If others blame him, he tries to improve or correct his behavior if he has been wrong; and if he hasn't, he realizes that blaming in others is an indication of disturbance in them. If others make mistakes, he tries to understand them and, if possible, to stop them from continuing their misdeeds; but if that is not possible, he tries not to let their behavior seriously upset him. When he makes mistakes, he admits and accepts this but does not let it become a catastrophe or lead him to feel worthless.

4. It is a terrible catastrophe when things are not as one wants them to be. This is irrational thinking because to be frustrated is normal, but to be severely and prolongedly upset is illogical, since a) there is no reason why things should be different from what they are in reality, b) getting upset not only rarely changes the situation, it usually makes it worse, c) if it is impossible to do anything about the situation, the only rational thing to do is to accept it, and d) frustration need not result in emotional disturbance if one does not define the situation in such a way as to make obtaining one's desires a necessity for satisfaction or happiness. The rational person avoids exaggerating unpleasant situations and works at improving them if he can or accepts them if he can't. Unpleasant situations may be disturbing, but they are not terrible or catastrophic unless we define them as such.

5. Unhappiness is caused by outside circumstances, and the individual has no control over it. Actually, outside forces and events, while they can be physically assaulting, usually are psychological in nature and cannot be harmful unless one allows oneself to be affected by one's attitudes and reactions. One disturbs oneself by telling oneself how horrible it is when someone is unkind, rejecting, annoying, etc. If one realized that distur-

bances or emotions consist of one's own perceptions, evaluations, and internalized verbalizations, they could be controlled or changed. The intellitent person will realize that unhappiness comes largely from within, and while he may be irritated or annoyed by external events, he will recognize that he can change his reactions by his definitions and verbalizations of these events.

6. Dangerous or fearsome things are causes for great concern, and their possibility must be continually dwelt upon. This is irrational because worry or anxiety (a) prevents an objective evaluation of the possibility of a dangerous event, (b) will often interfere with dealing with it effectively if it should occur, (c) may contribute to bringing it about, (d) leads to exaggerating the possibilities of its occurrence, (e) cannot possibly prevent inevitable events, and (f) makes many dreaded events appear worse than they are. The rational person recognizes that potential dangers are not as catastrophic as he fears, and that anxiety does not prevent them, but may increase them and may be more harmful itself than the feared events. He also realizes that he should do those things that he fears to do in order to prove that they are not actually frightful.

7. It is easier to avoid certain difficulties and self-responsibilities than to face them. This is irrational because avoiding a task is often harder and more painful than performing it, and leads to later problems and dissatisfactions, including loss of self-confidence. Also, an easy life is not necessarily a happy one. The rational individual does without complaint what he has to do, although he intelligently avoids unnecessary painful tasks. When he finds himself avoiding necessary responsibilities, he analyzes the reasons and engages in self-discipline. He realizes that the challenging, responsible, problem-solving life is the enjoyable life.

8. One should be dependent on others and must have someone stronger on whom to rely. While we all are dependent upon others to some extent, there is no reason to maximize dependency, for it leads to loss of independence, individualism, and self-expression. Dependency causes greater dependency, failure to learn, and insecurity, since one is at the mercy of those on whom one depends. The rational individual strives for independence and responsibility for himself, but he does not refuse to seek or accept help when he needs it. He recognizes that risks, while possibly resulting in failures, are worth taking, and that failing is not a catastrophe.

9. Past experiences and events are the determiners of present behavior; the influence of the past cannot be eradicated. On the contrary, what was once necessary behavior in certain circumstances may not be necessary at present. Past solutions to problems may not be relevant in the present. The presumed influence of the past may be used as an excuse for avoiding changing one's behavior. While it may be difficult to overcome past learnings, it is not impossible. The rational individual, while recognizing that the past is important, also realizes that he can change the present by analyzing past influences, questioning those acquired beliefs that are harmful, and forcing himself to act differently in the present.

10. <u>One should be quite upset over other people's problems and disturbances</u>. This is erroneous because other people's problems often have nothing to do with us and therefore should not seriously concern us. Even when others' behavior does affect us, it is our definition of its implication that upsets us. Becoming distraught over the behavior of others, while implying that we have power to control them, actually lessens our ability to change them. In any event, we suffer in the process and neglect our own problems. The rational person determines whether the behavior of others warrants becoming disturbed about, and if so, then attempts to do something that will help the other person to change. If nothing can be done, he accepts it and makes the best of it.

11. <u>There is always a right or perfect solution to every problem, and it must be found or the results will be catastrophic</u>. This is irrational because (a) there is no such perfect solution, (b) the imagined results of failure to find such a solution are unreal, but the insistence on finding one leads to anxiety of panic, (c) such perfectionism results in poorer solutions than are actually possible. The rational person attempts to find various possible solutions to a problem and accepts the best or most feasible, recognizing that there is no perfect answer.

Reference: <u>Theories of Counseling and Psychotherapy</u>
C. H. Patterson (2nd Edition)

Five Guidelines to Rational Thinking

1. Is this thought based on objective reality?

Evaluations that are not based on objective reality (the objective facts of the situation) are really lies because they are not based on the truth of the situation; they are based, rather, on subjective opinion which could be 1) how would I like it to be, 2) how I think it should be, 3) how it could have been, etc., anything except how it actually is. When thinking is not based on objective reality then the probability that a person will be unnecessarily upset is greatly increased because they are thinking, feeling, and therefore, acting on a reality (subjective opinion) that doesn't exist.

Example:

A person, going on vacation, gets to the airport and finds that his flight has been cancelled. He thinks "I can't stand this! This is impossible! All of my plans are ruined!"
These thoughts are not based on objective reality. 1) He can stand the cancellation of his flight. He may not like it but he can stand it; he will not die of the situation. 2) The situation is not impossible, as is proven by the fact that it has happened. He doesn't like it but that doesn't mean that it is impossible. 3) All of his plans are not ruined. He will need to make adjustments but he can continue his trip.
His three thoughts were not based on objective reality and they resulted in a great deal of unnecessary anger and frustration, unnecessary because these feelings do nothing to change the situation.

2. Does this thought help me to protect my life?

This question can be taken either literally, in the sense of suicide-oriented thoughts, or figuratively, in the sense that any negative emotion, especially chronic ones, can lead to physiological changes that are destructive to one's health, i.e., ulcers, chronic headaches, hypertension etc.

Example:

With regard to the "self-talk" of the previous example, these thoughts could not be considered protective of this person's life, in that they result in feelings of anger and frustration. These emotions if chronic, could possibly lead to health problems.

3. Does this thought help me to reach my short and long-term goals?

All behavior is goal-directed; it is done for the purpose of accomplishing something. We eat at noon because we are hungry or it's time to eat; we brush our teeth in order to prevent cavities or freshen our breath, etc. Therefore, if we are thinking thoughts that result in feelings and behaviors that prevent us from reaching

our short and long-term goals we have a conflict. In that event our feelings and behaviors are not accomplishing any goal that we want and their existence is counter-productive.

Example:

In the previous example, two of this person's goals were probably 1) to get started on his trip in an efficient manner and 2) to enjoy himself now and as the trip progressed. His self-talk are counter-productive because 1) he is feeling upset now and will probably continue to upset himself all through his trip unless he decides to think more objectively about the situation, and 2) being upset he is less likely to be able to think clearly as to how he might remedy his current situation. Although it is not probable that he would ever feel happy about having his flight cancelled, if he were to think and believe thoughts that would lead to calm acceptance of the facts of the situation, he would be less upset now, more able to efficiently change his plans, and more likely to enjoy the rest of his trip.

4. Does this thought prevent significant conflict with others?

The operative word here is "significant". "Significant" conflict is that amount that you do not want to have and are willing to act to avoid. In other words, there are times when a person will actively seek conflict with others, confrontation on an issue not because they enjoy the conflict but because they perceive it as necessary in order to reach a goal. At other times, conflict with others is not what they want, but it may be the secondary result of a strong negative feeling.

Example:

Suppose the person in our previous example was traveling with his wife. As a result of his negative thoughts, self-talk, he has strong feelings of anger and frustration. His wife calmly asks, "What are we going to do now?" and he turns on her angrily, berating her for expecting him to do everything! He isn't really angry with his wife and later feels guilty for yelling at her. So, his thoughts did not prevent significant conflict with his wife. In fact, they encouraged it.

5. Does this thought help me to feel the way I want to feel?

There are many things in life that a person cannot control but emotions are not one of them. To spend a significant portion of your life feeling emotions that you don't want to feel, when you don't have to feel that way, seems a waste of time and energy.

Example:

In our previous example the person was looking forward to his trip and wanted to feel happy, relaxed, and excited. His negative self-talk would not result in those feelings. So, they are not helping him to feel the way he wants to feel.

Granted, no one is perfect. So, it is not expected that a person would be able to have his/her thoughts meet all 5 Guidelines all of the time. But if your thoughts meet at least 3 of the five (3 "yes" answers) then they could be considered as being rational and in your own best interest. If you have 3 or more "no" or "not applicable" answers then your thoughts are irrational and need to be changed in order for you to think, feel and act in ways that are in your own best interest.

Example:

Our friend, in the previous example is going on vacation. He and his wife get to the airport and find that their flight has been cancelled.

He thinks, "Oh, well. This is inconvenient for us and I really wish it hadn't happened but it has and I can't change that situation. The reservation clerks are working to help the passengers reschedule so I'll wait my turn and see what they can come up with. We may have to juggle our plans a little but we'll get there and still have a good time."

These thoughts meet all 5 of the guidelines. They are rational and will help our friend to feel better and be able to act in ways that are in his own interest.

If you were our friend, which way would you rather think, feel and act?

IRRATIONAL USE OF "SHOULD"

The one word that underlies the majority of anger, irritation, frustration and guilt that human beings experience is the word "should."

Think about it! How have you always felt when you believed that something wasn't as it "should" be? Angry, of course!

"He should have been here 10 minutes ago!"

"You should have known better than to do it that way!"

"You should have had that report done days ago!"

"I should never have said 'yes' to that project!"

In scientific usage, "should" is defined as expressing conditionality or probability. It implies a cause and effect relationship, i.e., the sun should rise in the east in the morning and set in the west. The conditions to produce this effect are present, therefore, the effect should happen. Another way of thinking of this is - when everything necessary for something to happen has occurred, then the thing should happen. Conversely, when all the things necessary for something to happen haven't happened, then the thing should not happen. We call this the scientific or rational use of "should".

Now, in comparing the four examples that I gave earlier to this rational definition, it is noted that none of these four is an example of the rational use of "should". In all four cases, the persons speaking are demanding that reality be different than it is, i.e., that the person not have been late when he obviously was, that a person not have done something one way when it obviously was already done that way, that a report be done when it obviously isn't, and that I have said "no" when I didn't. In other words, some of the conditions necessary for those things to happen didn't occur, so the things didn't happen. This is a logical fact of reality. However, the individuals are demanding that reality be different than it is. For this reason, this usage of "should" is termed irrational.

Not only is the irrational use of "should" a denial of reality, it is also a disguised personal wish, want, or desire. What the person speaking really means is:

"I wanted you to be here 10 minutes ago."

"I would have done it differently" - or "I wish you had done it a different way."

"I wanted you to have the report done a few days ago."

"I wish I hadn't agreed to that project."

Notice the different emotional responses that these thoughts create as compared to the first set. These thoughts may elicit disappointment or irritation, but not the self-righteous anger of the first set. Additionally, notice the shift

in responsibility. In the first set, "He" and "You" are seemingly responsible for the speaker's anger. They are at fault, to blame -the implication is that they broke some "rule" and deserve the speaker's anger as punishment. In the latter set, the speaker is merely an individual expressing preferences.

Why do you suppose we choose to disguise our personal wants and wishes as demands? Let's look at a hypothetical situation:

> You have agreed to pick me up at 4:30. You don't show up until 5:00 because you got involved in a project of your own and forgot the time (you didn't do everything necessary to be there at 4:30).
>
> I have been making myself increasingly angry since 4:35 by thinking "He should have been here 5-10-15...minutes ago...Where is he? I told him 4:30...He should be here by now."
>
> When you finally get there I punish you with my anger, or stormy silence - so you will learn that you have done "wrong" and not do it again! Isn't that what punishment is for? You broke my rule -"People should always be on time" - and when we break rules we get punished. We learned that in childhood.

Contrary to popular belief, however, punishment is not a particularly effective way to elicit behavior change, either in ourselves or others. Telling a person, calmly and rationally, what you would have preferred they do is more likely to influence them to change in the future than is berating them. With ourselves, the disappointment and minor irritation of having something turn out differently than we wanted is usually enough to motivate us to change in the future, if we really want to change.

When resolving the problem of the irrational use of "should," I generally recommend that people rid their thoughts and speaking of the word entirely, and consciously substitute phrases such as "I would prefer," "I would like," "I wish," etc., honestly stating personal preferences, desires, opinions, rather than disguising them as rule-bound demands. Additionally, I ask them to recognize that given the law of cause and effect, everything is always as it should be, whether we like it that way or not.

As individuals, we may not like the reality of a situation, but instead of using our energy to righteously deny reality and thereby create destructive anger or guilt, why not, instead, accept reality as it is and use our energy creatively to try and influence change, if possible; or if change is not possible, to accept reality and go on to something else.

Lastly, as individuals we are not God and have neither the right nor the ability to set down "rules" that others must follow! Whenever you find yourself angry because a situation isn't the way you want it to be - stop yourself for a moment, and ask yourself the following question: "Where is it written in heaven or earth that life (or this situation) should be the way I want it to be?"